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SUBJECT: AYATOLLAH TELLS NEGROPONTE: U.S. MUST STAY UNTIL
THE JOB IS DONE

Classified By: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Baghdad's leading Shi'a cleric Ayatollah Hussein Al Sadr told Deputy Secretary of State John Negroponte October 6 that the United States and Iraq are "working toward a greater good" to establish a "strong, free, and prosperous" Iraq, but he urged the U.S. to "ensure we reach this goal," and warned against a premature exit from Iraq by U.S. forces. In an otherwise wide-ranging conversation on the situation in Iraq, Al Sadr returned to this point again and again, saying that the goal of strengthening Iraq "seemed to require more serious effort." Throughout the discussion, Al Sadr also sounded the alarm on excessive Iranian influence in Iraq. To punctuate his remarks, Al Sadr's aides warned that a return to instability in Iraq similar to Afghanistan's is not unimaginable. END SUMMARY.

DANGEROUS IF U.S. LEAVES

2. (C) Deputy Secretary Negroponte met Ayatollah Hussein Al Sadr at his home for a genial discussion that included dinner in the Ayatollah's garden and reminiscences of previous conversations. Pol M/C Ford, poloff (notetaker), and an embassy interpreter accompanied. Al Sadr repeatedly emphasized that the U.S. and Iraq had "achieved a lot" in joint efforts to develop a strong, free, and prosperous Iraq, but "had not yet achieved everything." Despite a "sound plan" and much "blood sacrificed" by both Iraqis and Americans, Al Sadr warned that the job is as yet incomplete. He believes that the Iraqi government is still weak and needs U.S. support. According to Al Sadr, it would be dangerous for the U.S. to leave Iraq soon.

IRAN IS NOT OUR GUARDIAN

3. (C) Claiming that he is "an Iraqi before a Shi'a," Al Sadr decried the "clear and flagrant" interference by other countries in Iraq's affairs. He singled out Syria, Saudi Arabia, and Iran in particular. Warming to the theme of undue Iranian influence, he asserted that "Persian footprints" are all over Iraq. Al Sadr maintains that Iranian intelligence has offices in the provincial governorates and even in the national Council of Representatives. He declared that "Iran is not our guardian" and wondered aloud how the U.S. could stay silent in the face of Iran's penetration into Iraq.

BADR MILITIAS

4. (C) The Ayatollah also directed some venom at the Shia Islamist group Badr, noting that the Shi'a militia Jaysh al-Mahdi had been stopped, but now the Badr Corps militia was asserting domination over the Interior Ministry (he provided no specifics). The Ayatollah said he was watching the competition between the Shia Islamist parties Dawa and

ISCI/Badr for tribal loyalties in southern Iraq. He worried that this competition could lead to armed clashes or even the creation of new tribal militias in southern Iraq when security there is relatively good now.

NEW POLITICIANS

15. (C) Al Sadr admonished the U.S. for installing expatriate Iraqi politicians as "princes" in Iraq, in whom Al Sadr and his followers had wanted to believe, but who ultimately did not deliver results. He believes Iraq's current politicians are weak and the country needs new ones. Speaking specifically of Prime Minister Maliki, Al Sadr believes him a "good man," but his overall performance "is not good." The Ayatollah advised "we should not continue with Maliki much longer."

WARNINGS

17. (C) At several points, Al Sadr and his aides called for increased U.S. involvement to support emerging political entities, and to counter popular discontent with the current Iraqi government. Al Sadr aides warned that "Iraq is ready" to return to a resurgence of violence similar to that taking place in Afghanistan now, led by "either Sunni or Shi'a." They wondered aloud "what would happen on December 31" if the U.S. and Iraq did not reach agreement on the SOFA, to which Deputy Negroponte replied "we will not stay if we are not wanted."

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COMMENT

18. (C) Al Sadr and his aides stuck closely to their talking points: on at least six occasions throughout the evening, he reiterated the don't-leave-the-job-undone theme. They were not assuaged by the Deputy Secretary's observations that Iraq was growing stronger. D noted their concerns but held that the U.S. must limit its involvement in internal Iraqi politics while not absolving itself of responsibility to continue to support Iraq's stability and growth. As a leading Shi'a cleric, dark horse successor to Ayatollah Sistani, and uncle to Muqtada Al Sadr, Al Sadr's comments highlight that despite some dissatisfaction with aspects of U.S. involvement in Iraq, influential Iraqis tell us that a continued U.S. presence is crucial for enduring Iraqi independence. END COMMENT.

19. (U) DepSec staff has cleared this cable.
CROCKER